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AMERICAN ART NEWS

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Owing to the disturbance caused by war conditions in the postal service, we cannot guarantee prompt delivery of this journal through the mails. For delays in such delivery, while they should be reported at once to this office we cannot accept blame. The journal is mailed in the General New York Post Office early Friday evening of each week and should reach our N. Y. City and suburban subscribers by Saturday morning, and those at greater distances in proportionate time.

When extra copies of any issue are required, advance notice of the number of copies so required should reach this office at latest by Thursday afternoon of any week. Later orders frequently cannot be filled.

ART BOOK REVIEW

LIFE AND WORKS OF OZIAS HUMPHRY, R. A.
By George C. Williamson, Litt.D. London: John Lane. The Bodley Head.

This is a fine volume and a scholarly biography of one of the "lesser known" Georgian British artists, deriving a pointed present interest from the recent Romney-Humphry controversy. It was the author, Dr. Williamson, who produced the evidence which determined the issue of the legal battle over the authorship of the picture of "The Ladies Waldegrave," previously supposed to be a portrait of "Mrs. Siddons and Her Sister" by Romney.

Dr. Williamson bases his biography upon original documents in possession of the R. A., relative to his subject, and original letters written by Humphry. The 286 illustrations, which embellish the text, enable the reader to form a fairly just idea of Humphry's power as a portraitist, at least, on the side of draughtsmanship. With a very few exceptions the portraits are not thrilling. Indeed, the level is that of an efficient and rather conventional portraitist, a face-painter whose chief ability consisted of "catching" a likeness with charity and dispatch. Nothing like genius ever "bursts" from his brush and only on the rarest occasions does his work get beyond the veriest mediocrity. A certain smoothness, softness, which is really a want of character, makes his work acceptable to the commonplace mind. A total lack of verve in the manipulation of material renders his art obsolete to the modern "technique" loving world.

If it were not for the references to greater men with which Dr. Williamson's text abounds, one might consider this work a labor lost, but the Georgian artistic period is so vital that any serious study of it is quite worth while. Americans will doubly enjoy the book for its references to their early artists, Copley, West and Stuart. A valuable catalog of Humphry's paintings concludes the admirable volume.

James Britton.

THE USE OF CONTROVERSY

The art season opens with some interesting controversies, the waging of which we welcome to our columns, as we consider it a gratifying proof that even in the crash of arms in this world war, interest in the arts is still widespread and burning. As Gladstone truly said, "the best preservative of a government and the life of a people is agitation regarding said government," so the best possible incentive to continued and growing interest in the art life of America are controversies of the kind that we have made public of late and continue this week to publish.

While we at times take our part editorially in these art and art trade controversies, we are always pleased to receive and publish communications from those who may differ with other correspondents or with our own opinion, and while we give space today to further adverse criticism of Miss Mechlin's condemnation of the art of the Russian painter, Boris Anisfeld, in her letter to Dr. Brinton, published by us last week, and especially to her action in attempting to prejudice the country's museums against said art, we are pleased to publish also a defense of her views and action from a valued correspondent. We have always wished this journal to be an "open forum," as it were, wherein artists, collectors, dealers, and art lovers may find an opportunity to freely express their views on timely and interesting topics with the knowledge that through an art newspaper—now weekly—they can more quickly obtain the attention and interest of all art lovers than through even the dailies, not read as a rule for art information and under present conditions too crowded for space to give much attention to the subject, or through the few art monthlies, necessarily made up far in advance of their publication dates, and consequently not available for news.

CORRESPONDENCE

Albert Sterner vs. Miss Mechlin

Editor AMERICAN ART NEWS,

Dear Sir: I have read with interest the correspondence between Miss Mechlin and Dr. Christian Brinton in the AMERICAN ART NEWS of last week in reference to the coming Boris Anisfeld exhibition. I have also read the very cogent editorial in the same issue, and, moreover, I have seen the collection of Boris Anisfeld's work now in the galleries of the Brooklyn Museum.

Although the main questions at issue in this controversy have been fairly threshed out, something may be said from the artist's point of view. It is from this viewpoint that I venture to write.

I have been and am always a believer and strong advocate of the protection and patronage by our people of their own artists, yet it has always seemed to me necessary—nay, incumbent upon us to hail the advent of the work of the foreign artist and to become familiar with his performance.

Such open-mindedness can but supplement the early education in art that most of us received abroad in European schools and create in the layman a catholic understanding of all art.

It is therefore surprising to me to find Miss Mechlin, connected as she is with an institution as comprehensive as the Federation of Fine Arts, attempting to ban the exhibition of the works of Boris Anisfeld.

It is not my intention to speak critically of this work, but after having seen it I must say that Miss Mechlin's statements are far more "distorted" than in most instances is the drawing of Anisfeld. There is a great deal that is most interesting in this painter's work—color that is personal and brilliant and a mood of expression which is both Russian and often peculiarly his own.

Says Miss Mechlin:

"We are fighting today a great fight for civilization, for the supremacy of the spiritual over the material, for those things which tend to make life more noble, more beautiful, more fine, and we are giving in the cause the best of our manhood—those whom we hold most dear. Certainly it is our sacred duty under these circumstances to do nothing to hinder, to pull down, or to destroy that for which so gigantic a sacrifice is being made."

Miss Mechlin, for some astonishing reason, makes her plea for the abandoning of this exhibition by the museums partly dependent upon the fact that "we are at war," that "we have made great sacrifices," and that therefore "we must only show what is pure, noble, spiritual—that which will help our national life." Miss Mechlin seems to know definitely what is "pure, noble, spiritual?"

But art that endures has no particular concern with war. War is ephemeral; it passes. Virtually no great artists of the past have been actuated in their expression through war, although it has often raged furiously about them. War, as such, is not subject matter for great art; witness the miles of battle pictures that have been painted, only to be justly neglected.

Nor has any great art ever been intentionally didactic. Great art is never consciously moral. It is invariably born of a mood; it is always passionate, joyous or tragic. That it exalts, ennobles, suggests by its essentially pictorial quality, is, of course, true, but it is well to realize that the ultimate verdict on a work of art is a universal verdict, and that to attain such judgment, complete freedom of expression must be granted the artist and equally free means of viewing his work given to the public.

It is for these reasons and because the above principle must be upheld that I sincerely trust Miss Mechlin's attempt to thwart this exhibition may not succeed.

There is always a fight going on for better conditions in civilization, but opinions are various regarding the most potent means for bringing these conditions about.

For the artist it seems to me, above all, unhindered freedom of expression is paramount when he addresses a public that he hopes can learn, and that eventually does learn, to accept and understand his point of view.

That this point of view comprehends the entire gamut of life is self-evident, and it is doubtful whether by arbitrary interference any individual or individuals can pre-judge that which is to go before the public.

Sincerely,

Albert Sterner.

New York, Oct. 22, 1918.

The Mechlin-Brinton Controversy

Editor AMERICAN ART NEWS.

Dear Sir:

I started to write you about the controversy between Miss Leila Mechlin and Mr. Christian Brinton and before I knew it had two thousand words or more, which of course, is quite beyond the available space of the ART NEWS and the patience of your readers. As the controversy includes the whole question of what is worth while in art, I propose writing you in weekly instalments, a chapter at a time. Miss Mechlin needs no defense and she is quite able to take care of herself, but nevertheless I venture to express the thoughts aroused, or rather fanned, by her letter and its critic.

This communication has nothing to do with the question as to whether Miss Mechlin's estimate of the work of the Russian painter, which it is proposed to exhibit in all the museums in the country, is right or wrong. I have seen neither the originals nor the photographs and therefore have at present no opinion to offer as to the merits of the work. However, the artist's portrait leaves one with the antipathy that the virile must ever have for the male who puts himself on record with a décolleté garment. I judge from the face and the name that he belongs to a race of much older history than the Slavic. It would be indeed a pity if the first thing to come to us out of regenerating Russia should be degenerate.

I am glad that there is one strong, brave woman to champion the cause of good taste and common decency in art as she sees it, and to face unflinchingly the scornful indictment of narrowness and obstruction to liberty and progress and all the stock ammunition of those who, to quote the great alienist, "fall into raptures and exhibit vehement emotions over works which are manifestly ridiculous and degrading."

It requires so much more courage for a woman to take this stand, for people are still under the ancient delusion that women are more prudish than men. And all who know Miss Mechlin will be convinced that when she says, "to send out such paintings as works of art at this time would be, I believe, a crime and a national calamity," no view of the originals would modify her verdict, and therefore the reproach for condemning this collection before seeing the originals is not just.

To say that one should not judge a work of art by a photograph is true only to a certain extent. One could not form a correct estimate of a Monet without seeing the original but one can decide from a photo-

graph that a Gothic cathedral is beautiful and "Carpenter's classic" ugly, and Miss Mechlin's judgment in condemning this show is no doubt based on characteristics which no color, tone, finish, quality or surface would justify in her opinion. Her critic shows lack of sense of values when he weighs the question of courtesy toward himself against her conviction that a wrong to art is imminent.

Yours very truly,

N. Y., Oct. 23, 1918. Charles Vezin.

"Upon What Meat, etc."

Editor AMERICAN ART NEWS.

Dear Sir:

I was both interested and amused at the letters published in your last issue, exchanged between Miss Leila Mechlin and Dr. Christian Brinton, in re the coming exhibition of the works of the Russian painter, Boris Anisfeld. I say "amused" because Miss Mechlin's action in this matter, as also her attitude toward the works of an artist which she had never seen nor studied, seems to me to be the logical outgrowth of placing undue powers and authority of direction in one who, as you say, has presumably never had the opportunity of sufficient study, especially abroad, of the field of art in general to make her an authority. It seems to me that the directors or trustees of the American Federation of Arts should not permit an officer or paid employee of their organization to write, in their official capacity, any letters for or against art exhibitions, in advance of these being held especially to the country's art institutions. If the directors or members of the council of the Federation had themselves seen and studied Mr. Anisfeld's works and considered them unfit for exhibition, they would have been privileged to empower Miss Mechlin, as the Federation's secretary, to enter a protest to the country's museums, as coming from the Federation itself, and such a protest would, undoubtedly, have been heeded, but I contend that Miss Mechlin was not privileged to make such a protest in her official capacity.

I am tempted to paraphrase the immortal Williams's sentence: "Upon what meat hath this our Leila fed, that she hath grown so great?" Yours very truly,

American Museum Director.

Gloucester, Mass., Oct. 22, 1918

OBITUARY

H. Ephraim Benguiat

H. Ephraim Benguiat died Oct. 31 at the Mt. Sinai Hospital, aged 67. He was the eldest of the several Benguiat brothers, the best known of whom were and are Isaac, Vital and Benjamin, and was the father of Mordecai and Joseph, who are also well known, as well as was their father, in the antique rug and textile trade. Mr. Benguiat was born in Smyrna, of Spanish-Jewish parentage, and had a wide knowledge of old weaves and textiles. He had a serious business dispute with his brother Vital a few years ago, which affair brought his name into prominence here.

ART BOOK REVIEW

Cameo Portraiture in America. By Howard M. Chapin. Edition absolutely limited to 100 copies; illustrated. Preston & Rounds Co., Providence, R. I. Price \$3.

Mr. Chapin has sought out a theme that has not hitherto been exploited, and he has built up a thin volume that will make a strong appeal to both artist and connoisseur. The text was originally prepared as a paper which was read on April 10 of the present year, but the demand for it was so great that it was put into its present book form.

Cameos are usually cut in agates, sardonyx being the best adapted to the purpose, or in certain tropical shells having two layers of color. Other substances less commonly utilized for making cameos are certain birds' eggs, glass, glass paste, lava, coral, and various hard minerals. The art of cutting gems and semi-precious stones in low relief goes back many centuries before Christ. The earliest cameo now known, according to the Chapin book, is the stone in the ring of Polycrates, carved by Theodorus of Samos in the VI century before Christ.

The art of cameo cutting was practised extensively by the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, but fell into disuse during the IV century A. D., and, although occasionally practised, was not revived upon a large scale until the XV century. Then it came into vogue in Italy and spread to France, where for a time it was extensively cultivated. At present very little cameo cutting is done outside of Italy. Cameos were generally cut in allegorical or ornamental designs, but cameo portraiture has been occasionally practised. Mr. Chapin concerns himself particularly with American cameo portraiture in his present monograph. He names George O. Annable of Providence, William Morris Hunt of Boston, John C. King of the same city, who cut cameo portraits of Horace Greeley, Benjamin Franklin and John J. Audubon; Augustus Saint Gaudens and Margaret Foley as the leading exponents of this art in America.